Pudhumaipithan's film career was short-lived, but his short stories endure

HE LED A LIFE OF PENURY, left a legacy of plenty

Vamanan

Seventy-five years ago, when 42-year-old Pudhumaipithan (born C Vridhachalam), lay dying of tuberculosis his father-in-law's house in Thiruvananthapuram, then the capital of the Travancore princely state, he told his grieving wife Kamala, "My final legacy to this world are my film 'Rajamukthi' and our daughter Thilakari. I had wanted to look after you well, but fate has brought me only to this pass."

'Rajamukthi' was the comeback film of the singing superstar M K Thyagaraja Bhagavathar after he was acquitted in the Lakshmikanthan murder case following his incarceration for more than two years (he was one of several accused in the murder of the film journalist). But before and after prison, Bhagavathar was Bhagavathar, and the call from him to Pudhumaipithan to write the dialogues for his film was a great opportunity that would finally set the writer's precarious finances on an even keel. It is perhaps because of this prospect of financial salvation that Pudhumaipithan mentioned 'Rajamukthi' to his wife. The film flopped and was quickly consigned to oblivion.

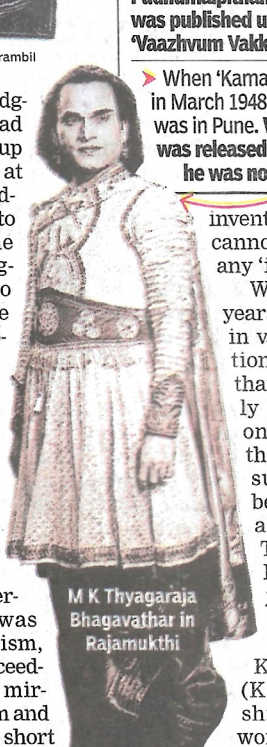
Pudhumaipithan's legacy turned out to be his body of writing, particularly short stories, that gave him the posthumous reputation of a titanic figure of modern Tamil literature, though there was criticism too of foreign influences like Maupassant and Chekhov in his early writing and loads of negativity and bitterness in the closing phase. The name Pudhumaipithan translates as 'one who is crazy for novelty', but more appropriately it indicates his yen for originality, innovation and experimentation.

But in the case of the Tamil talkie in its incipient decades, Pudhumaipithan did not evince the condescending and cavalier attitude of some prominent literary figures. Writing for the annual issue of the Sri Lankan Tamil newspaper Eezha Kesari (April 1938), Pudhumaipithan described the state of Tamil filmmaking in the context of Hollywood, British and Hindi films. He treated Tamil cinema kindly and pointed out ways to rectify its faults with empathy.

Illustration: Shinod Akkaraparambil

When 'Kalki' Krishnamurthy joined issue with his former employer S S Vasan (who had gone on to establish Gemini Studios and make films) on the question of the British government's restriction of 11,000 feet for Indian feature films (to conserve stock for war propaganda films), Pudhumaipithan supported the latter and lambasted Kalki for his views and values. This might have been one of the reasons for Pudhumaipithan being drafted later to write the script for Gemini Vasan's 'Avvaiyar' in the mid-1940s.

The son of a prosperous tahsildar, Pudhumaipithan might have, like Franz Kafka, remarked about his father's "total lack of feeling for the suffering and shame" inflicted on him with his "words and judgments". The father had wanted the son to take up a government job, or at least practise law. Pudhumaipithan swerved to the other end of the spectrum as a struggling writer who slogged it out in the underpaid job of a sub-editor in newspapers like Dinamani and Dinasari (the leftist literary critic T K Sivasankaran has called attention to the dreary working conditions of working journalists in pre-Independence India). Nonetheless, in a literary situation that was marked by romanticism, Pudhumaipithan succeeded in holding up the mirror of stinging realism and satire to society in his short stories, though the highly inventive story writer cannot be reduced to any 'ism'.



M K Thyagaraja Bhagavathar in Rajamukthi

When after 11 years as a journalist in various publications, Pudhumaipithan was financially back to square one, he looked to the film world for succour. He had before him the example of M K Thyagaraja Bhagavathar and journalists such as Elangovan, B S Ramaiah and K Ramachandran (Ki Ra) who had shifted to the film world successfully. Director Murugadasa, who was with Gemini Studios then, is said to have had a hand in this transition. He roped in Pudhumaipithan to do the script work of Gemini's 'Avvaiyar'. Being signed by a premier production house gave Pudhumaipithan hope, as did the advance amount. He brought a whiff of fresh air to his interpretations of the magical figure of Avvaiyar, but finally nothing came out of the seemingly never-ending project for him. The film was finally released in 1953 without any credits to him.

Pudhumaipithan was paid handsomely for the story and dialogues of 'Kamavalli' (1948) but as there is almost no trace of the film except for a song book, we can only guess the impact of his work from contemporary reactions to it. Veteran film director Raja Chandrasekhar is said to have recommended Pudhumaipithan to Thyagaraja Bhagavathar saying that his lines for 'Kamavalli' were like "sparks that flv from the grinding wheel when blades are sharpened". Pudhumaipithan was booked by Bhagavathar, who was also the producer of the film.

In between, Pudhumaipithan began work on a script on Kattabomman, the poligar who battled with the East India Company but this film did not take off. He started his own production house (Parvathakumari productions) in the name of his mother whom he had lost when he was eight. Getting into production was a terrible mistake that drained him of the scanty resources he had, as well as his peace of mind and well-being.

It was in this state that Pudhumaipithan went to Pune to complete his script for 'Rajamukthi'. The letters he wrote from Pune speak of the horrors he faced even as he wrestled single-handedly with his work on the one hand and the ravages of tuberculosis on the other. Add to this the spectre of a riot-torn Pune after the assassination of Gandhi. When at last he returned to Thiruvananthapuram, a friend marvelled at his courage at having attempted the journey. But Pudhumaipithan had only returned to die among those who cared for him.

(The writer is a historian of Tamil cinema and an author of several books on the subject

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- C Vridhachalam (1906-1948), Sovi to some, wrote under pseudonyms such as Rasamattam, Koothan, Nandan and Kabali. **Pudhumaipithan was the most famous**
- He wrote short stories (about 100), a novella **(Sitrannai, which inspired director Mahendran to make his Uthiripookkal)**, translations of short stories from English, essays and book reviews
- The respected Tamil film journal Gundusi, **in its obituary reference to Pudhumaipithan, described him as a good-hearted person and called for public support to create a memorial for him**
- Booked to do the script for 'Lakshmi Vijayam' (1948), Pudhumaipithan was replaced by D V Chari. **The script that Pudhumaipithan wrote for the film was published under the title 'Vaazhvum Vakkum'**
- When 'Kamavalli' was released in March 1948, Pudhumaipithan was in Pune. **When 'Rajamukthi' was released in October 1948, he was no more**